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ABSTRACT

Young adult literature is the subject of this journal. The first article, "The Executioner Sings" (Jay Bennett), relates how and why its author writes. The next article, "Cinderella and the Pigman" (Lucy E. Waddey), explains why kids read the works of Judy Blume and Paul Zindel. "An interview with Keven Major" (Mike Angelotti) is the next selection. The fourth article, "Beyond Books: Media for the Classroom" (Dan Ward), describes several works of literature available in tape and film versions. The journal's final article, "Historical Fiction and Historical Interpretation" (Joel Taxel), points out the educational value of several historical novels. (JL) .

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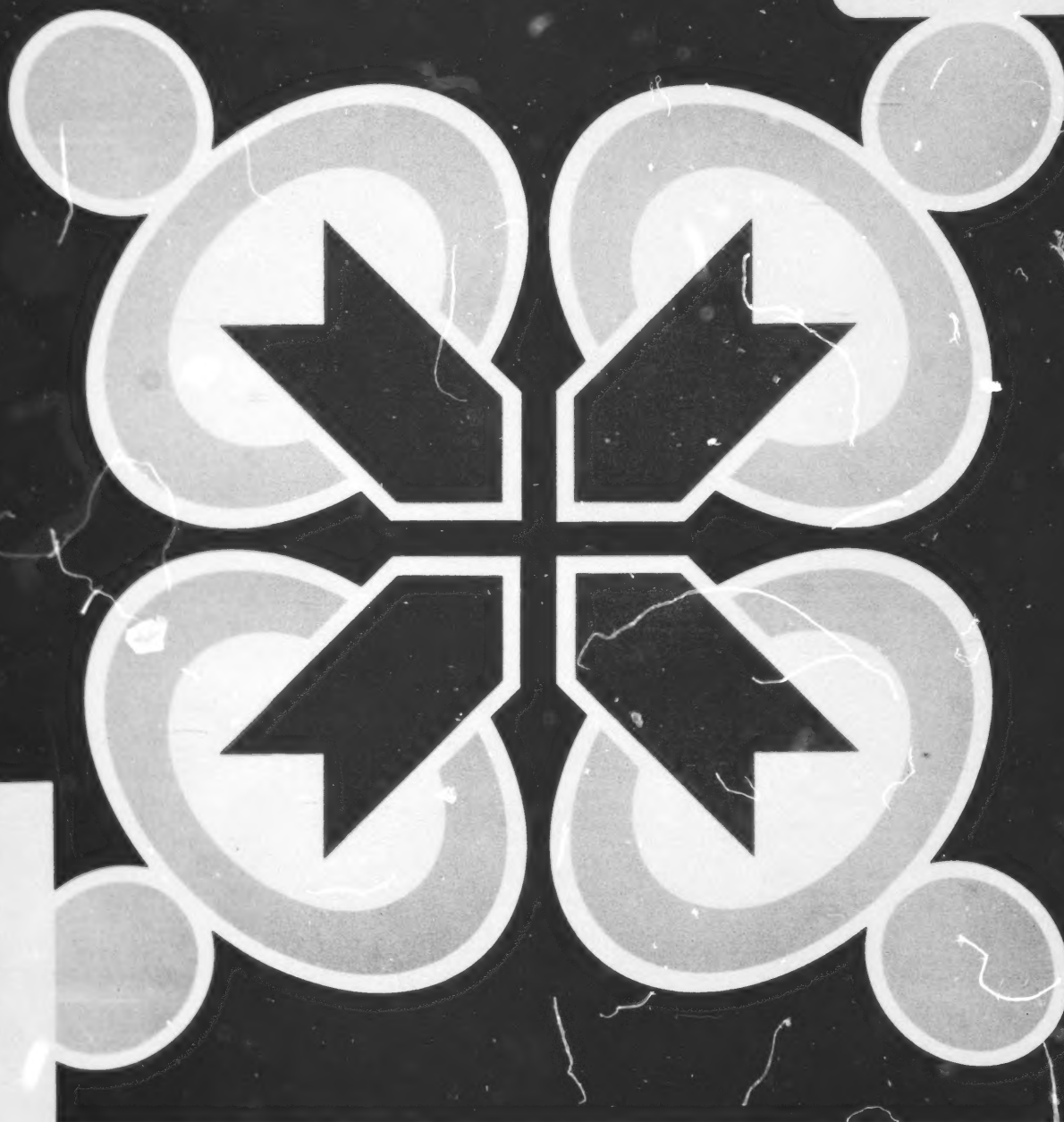
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THE EXECUTIONER SINGS

Jay Bennett

He sat there, his hand gripping the cane, the darkness sweeping in over the water and surging onto him, till he was enveloped. And he saw the snow again, the white, falling snow and he drifted back along the swirling current and then he found himself caught in that cruel night, caught tight and hard and there was no escape.

No escape from that fatal night of the party.

"Christ," he said to himself. "Let me alone. Please let me alone."

But he was caught.

He saw Raymond, tall and lean, get up from a sofa and come over to him.

The Executioner

My wife had gone to visit her sister in Philadelphia, and I was home writing and then the phone rang. It was a writer friend and it was Saturday night and I had done a long day's writing and I was lonely.

So I got into my car and drove from Brooklyn to Westchester, and there were other writers and artists and a party was going on.

I slipped away at two in the morning. I remember looking at my watch as I got into my car. I remember looking at my watch as I got out of my car.

It was four thirty-two.

This happened many years ago before the children were born.

I got into the house, swayed a bit and then dropped down on a couch and went to sleep. In the morning I awoke, slowly opened my eyes and looked about me, and as I did a chill started within me and I began to tremble.

For I had begun to think of the night. And I suddenly realized that I remembered getting into the car in Westchester at two and getting out of it in front of my house in Brooklyn at four thirty-two.

And that was all.

Nothing. Absolutely nothing in between.

I went outside into the grey morning and began examining the car and as I did I kept thinking — I had driven a car two and half hours, over a bridge, into a tunnel, onto a drive, through city streets and I could not remember one second of that ride.

I stood in the thin sunlight and looked at the

car. Looked at it with dread, wondering what I had done with it. Had I hit a person, another car, as I drove in a cold drunk through the night?

I found no marks on the car.

I went back into the house and sat down and did not move for a long, long time. And then I knew that I would never know what had happened in those lost hours.

Never.

Just a short while ago, I sat down and wrote a novel about a young fellow, Bruce Kendall, who leaves a party with his best friend, Raymond Warner. Raymond is the driver of the car and he is completely sober. Bruce is drunk and he causes a fatal accident which kills Raymond.

The book, called *The Executioner*, has had impact and has done extremely well in reviews and sales. I was able to get into my central character's skin, skull, and heart, into his very being, because in my still tortured imagination I was Bruce Kendall.

So you see, the lost two and a half hours never left me. And that is how a writer lives and writes.

Why did I wait all these years to write a novel about drunk driving? I don't know. Maybe I needed those years to distance me from the actual experience. Maybe inside it was too painful, too chilling, too unnerving for me to face it nakedly. And if you'll notice, I didn't write about adults. My central character was a teenager. I protected myself that way.

But just to stay with this a bit longer. It's complex. My central character was a teenager because I wanted to deal with the problem of drinking and driving and teenagers.

I put it all in the suspense genre, because I am a suspense writer and have made my mark with teenagers as a suspense writer.

So there is the origin and genesis of *The Executioner*. How did some of my other suspense novels come into being? But first I believe I should take up how I became a writer of some twelve novels, eleven of them in the suspense genre, and all of them for a young adult readership.

To fully answer that I must go back to the time I began writing at the age of seventeen. I started in the theater. I projected a three-act play, wrote one scene of it and then gave the whole thing up. But I was launched. From then on I tried desperately hard to get recognized. For a period of more than fourteen years I wrote short stories, poetry, novels, and plays. Not one word of my writing was ever accepted. Nor did I get one letter of encouragement. And now I was married, my wife had lost her job and had to go home to Atlantic City, the telephone had been taken out, and I had one more month to go before the landlord locked the door on me.

I found out that a radio show called "Grand Central Station" was buying half-hour radio dramas. I sat down and wrote twenty-seven radio dramas, one a day, and brought them into the production office. No dice. With three days to go, there was a knock on my apartment door, and it was an old Czechoslovakian candy store owner who had climbed the four flights to tell me there was an important phone call for me. He had left the store untended to get me.

I never forgot him and I never forgot the offer of five hundred dollars for my twenty-seventh radio drama.

And that's how I started. I wrote for all the networks, won some awards, and then when television took over, I went into that field and wrote a number of years for the shows, went out to Hollywood for a short stay, found it was not my cup of tea and came back to New York. I wrote nine stage plays, one was produced in New York and the other in London, some suspense novels, one made into a Warner Brothers movie, and then went into the young adult field.

So there was a long, long background of writing, thinking, feeling, and experiencing that went into my writing of the first novel, *Deathman, Do Not Follow Me* and of the others that followed. I had always been a committed writer, one who felt that every word that he wrote should be honest and true, should start from a feeling that we are human beings, all of us, and that we have some tremendous human and social problems in front of us, all of the time, all the way, and they'll be always there. I had a teenage son and another one who would in five years become a teenager. Their world interested me mightily. And that is how I decided to enter into it and become a part of it. My first novel dealt with the loner and the philosophical problem of what is illusion and what is reality.

That problem is still with us. If we don't find

out the difference soon enough, we'll all be blown away. I chose the suspense genre to say what I have to say, because I have a complete knowledge of it; my first radio play, the one that opened the world of writing for me, was a suspense drama. From that time on I had written many suspense shows, some adult suspense novels, and I felt easy and good in doing them. I also chose suspense because the young are always interested in the genre. A suspense story well told can be a damn good one, and the young like damn good stories.

While I'm at it, I'll say a word about suspense and violence. The suspense genre, by its very nature, must deal with violence or the threat of violence. But this does not mean that the writer should bring in violence for the sake of violence. Just to titillate, to thrill, to shock the reader. This, unfortunately, we find aplenty in adult books, in movies, and in quite a few television shows.

I abhor violence. I've seen too much of it in my lifetime. So when I use it, I try to use it obliquely, rarely to state it nakedly. I use violence to show that it is a destroyer of all that is human and decent. Violence empties the human being of his human content.

Shakespeare points the way. For example, in *Macbeth* he shows that violence destroys all that is warm and precious in us. He takes a noble general and shows step by descending step how this man becomes, in Macduff's words, a hell hound. By the time *Macbeth* and Macduff confront each other, all of the king's humanity has completely left him. He can no longer be described in human terms. Life to him has become "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury and signifying nothing."

Too many writers today trivialize death and in so doing they trivialize life. We should focus not on how people die, but on how they live. Particularly in the young adult suspense genre. A character must have meaning and depth and dimension so that we identify with him or her and are greatly interested in how that person lives and in what threatens the existence of that being. And if that person dies in the logic of events set up by the author, the death should be a shattering experience to the reader. I've read too many books and seen too many movies and television shows where the characters are cardboard and their deaths as meaningful as the snapping of a tree twig.

Which brings me a little further in on how I write. I consider myself a poetic realist. My style is terse, loaded with many levels. I do not write

that way so that the teachers can assign my books for easy reading students. Teachers and librarians do that, and I get letters from some of my readers who start off saying, I don't like to read much, but the librarian gave me your book and said, try it, it's pretty easy reading.

I write the way I do, a style that is natural with me and took many years to develop and hone, because I find it the best way to say what I have to say. I write on many levels and I am pleased when my readers write and tell me how they react. The top level of pure story always comes through. The other levels are sometimes grasped directly, and most times, instinctively or intuitively, but sometimes almost awkwardly. But they are grasped.

I believe another reason that I am read, and will continue to be read, is that I have become too old for conceit and too young for lies. Every word I write is a deeply felt one. I could not fake it if I tried.

By the way, I've always felt that we writers, teachers, and librarians are locked into the same destiny. Either we become committed or we die as human beings. Some die quickly and others take a lifetime of dying. But it is all the same.

When I write I try to develop character. To reflect reality. To have a depth of perception.

My central character has to grow or he or she dies as a human being.

That character has to make choices.

That character has to exercise will. Particularly at a climactic point in the novel.

That character has to relate to fellow human beings. Otherwise, I say you cannot make it. Life just can't be done alone. I've dealt with the loner as a central character in a number of my books. There are many young loners in our society today. It is a heart-breaking phenomenon of our world. It keeps me up at nights. And what keeps me up at nights has to go into my books for young adults.

I try hard for plausibility. For without plausibility you might as well pack up your tools and go home. That's the way it's been in writing from the time of Homer and the great saga writers of the Bible.

I've always felt that plausibility comes mainly from dimensional characters in action. When you have cardboard characters, it's almost impossible to have plausibility. And when you do not have plausibility, you have no way to go for credibility. You've been knocked out of the box in the very first inning by the first batter.

By the way, all of this presumes an intelligent and interested readership. And I firmly be-

lieve from my experience that the young adult readership is a highly intelligent and aware one.

I try to create mood from the very first word. Mood and interest. I may have learned this from my early radio days. If you could not do that, the listener immediately turned you off and went to another part of the dial. I say I may have learned it then, but I believe the facility was always with me.

Some things you are born with and then develop further over the years by hard work and concentration.

And I always write about what I know.

I stay away from my weaknesses. It takes years of writing to learn your weaknesses and strengths. Sometimes you never find them out. Particularly the weaknesses. The strengths, illusory or not, always are easily seen and appreciated. The ego takes care of that one.

Let me give an example of one of my basic weaknesses.

There are no small children in any one of my books. There are times when I feel I could use them to good advantage. They would bring a certain tone and feeling to my work. They could help very well in certain plot situations. Oh, there are many ways I could bring them into my novels.

But I stay away from children. I love children and get along well with them. But in the world of writing, I just can't seem to spark them into being.

I just can't seem to get into them, into the way they think and talk and imagine. They're great imaginers and I consider myself a great imager and yet...I just can't seem to do it.

Why?

For the life of me, I don't know.

I discovered this weakness early in my writing life. I wrote some children characters in my radio dramas, and when the actors came into the studio to play the roles, I saw how much trouble they had with them and how much they had to do to bring the characters to life. I was appalled. It was then and there I decided to face my weakness and forever stay away from it.

One of my strengths?
Mood.

It was always easy and natural for me to establish mood. Like a pitcher who is a natural fast ball thrower. He just rears back and throws. Mood is feeling. And I feel myself right into the thing. Mood and atmosphere. I get into them so completely that a few times I have literally scared myself upon hearing a sudden sound in my writ-

ing room, such as the sudden sharp ring of the telephone. I recover and pick up the phone, and it is my wife asking me to meet her downtown for dinner. She's been shopping and would like to eat out. I say yes and go back to the typewriter and read the sentence that is half-finished and start with the word I had left dangling, and the mood and atmosphere flow back inexorable and completely.

I said I write about what I know. Well, for example, *The Pigeon* is set most of the time in Greenwich Village. I've walked the streets of the Village hundreds of times, have sat in the cafes, have met many of its bizarre characters, even some terrorists who are models for the terrorists who play quite a part in the novel, and most important of all, I have met and known a teacher exactly like Mrs. Fisher. She has to make an agonizing decision whether to help the young fugitive escape the police or to turn him in. She makes a philosophical choice between justice and law.

In my latest book, *Slowly, Slowly I Raise the Gun*, I deal with a father-son confrontation. The epigraph of the book, which is coming out this August, is: Slowly, Slowly I Raise the Gun and Point it at the head of my father. Jamie, the father, is a six-foot-five, former all-pro linebacker who is now in serious financial trouble. Bruce, the son, feels that his father is planning to murder him for his inheritance. I know the world of football because I once played in it. Incidentally, I do not go into the sport itself, but into the character of the father who once played the sport and still lives in its world. I made a writing decision there. I wanted a narrower and hotter focus. Bruce has the role of Hamlet in his high school production of the play. And I blend in the characters of Hamlet and Bruce and parallel the struggle between Claudius and Hamlet and Jamie and Bruce.

Which brings me to another aspect of my writing. I try, wherever I can, to bring in references to literature, art, and music in my books. They, of course, must be organic. I do so because I consider myself a cultivated man, and I want my readers to become aware of that great and rich world ever waiting for them.

The theme of cultivation and literature brings me to the teaching of literature to the young adult. I've always felt that literature must be enjoyed. This, to me, comes first. All else follows. If it is not enjoyable, it will not be rewarding, nor will it be uplifting, and it certainly won't be informing. It becomes to the teacher an exercise in futility. As one who has studied Shakes-

peare an entire lifetime — I was the first writer to adapt *Hamlet* for television — I was very fortunate to have in my eighth grade a teacher who loved Shakespeare and made us thoroughly enjoy *Julius Caesar*. We even put on a production of it. I still see that teacher, and my heart warms every time we get together.

And now let my finish with this:

I wrote a book, *The Deadly Gift*, which has as its central character a young Mohawk Indian, the son of high-steel workers who have a community in Brooklyn. I should say *had*, because I understand that most of the Indian community has thinned away.

I always thought the idea and central character of the book came to me intuitively one morning as I sat at the typewriter. I distinctly remember the character and central situation just kind of bursting into life. It was almost like automatic writing. And I thought it all must have come from my walking around the neighborhood and talking to some of the Mohawk steelworkers.

But now I know that it was not that at all. I know the very experience from which the book emerged.

I know because one night for no reason at all, sitting alone, it came back to me, vivid and very forceful.

I remembered it all.

Many years ago I was riding a freight train from Kansas to Colorado. Sitting with me in the empty boxcar was a young Navaho. He had hopped on just as the train was clearing Junction City and starting its slow climb to Denver. We sat and talked a good way through the night. And then the train stopped dead and a big guy with a club and a gun came along and threw us out into the rain.

There was a look on the Navaho's face. A hard, hopeless look. He never said another word to me as we walked along the tracks. I saw his eyes, the hat, the dungarees tight and wet on his legs.

I never saw him again.

But I know now I never forgot him and all he said to me in the boxcar and all he said when we walked to the dawn, and he didn't speak a word. I know now how I came to write *The Deadly Gift*. And why I feel the way I do about Indians. You see, I went back to New York and became a writer. And he went on to nowhere.

CINDERELLA AND THE PIGMAN: Why Kids Read Blume and Zindel Novels

Lucy E. Waddey, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

The novels of Judy Blume and Paul Zindel are by far the best-selling books for teens today. Blume's *Forever* is the volume most requested by teens in the New York Public Library and is virtually required reading among girls all over the country. Zindel has made half a million dollars from *The Pigman* and had produced a shamelessly derivative sequel. Because these books treat sex, alcohol, parental failures, and foolish teachers, *Time* magazine believes their popularity heralds a lucrative new genre: "suburban social realism." (*Time*, p. 66)

Yet are they "realistic"? Freud believed that popular novels like these (and like those of Barbara Cartland and Louis L'Amour for adults) offer not real life but life as we would have it — daydreams, satisfying the ego's need to be the "hero alike of every daydream and story." (Freud, p.150) Thus the more popular the work, the more satisfying it must be to a great many egos. This same argument has been made for the value of the fairy tale. Its long history, its presence in every culture, its recurrent motifs all mean that fairy tales appeal to something deeply shared by humanity, and among the theories explaining the origin of these tales is that of psychological genesis, that the tales are "dream sequences, the products of psychological difficulties." (Opie, p. 17) J.R.R. Tolkien has explored the psychological value of the tales: "It is one of the lessons of fairy-stories...that on callow, lumpy, and selfish youth peril, sorrow, and the shadow of death can bestow dignity, and even sometimes wisdom." (Tolkien, p. 67) The novels of Judy Blume and Paul Zindel attempt that same lesson, sharing not only some of the literary characteristics of the fairy tale but its deep therapeutic value as well. Their surface realism is just that, a thin layer of packaging through which adolescents can enjoy their fantasies, a deeply satisfying daydream which nourishes and supports them in their efforts to establish themselves as individuals.

In an essay first published in 1947, Tolkien explored many aspects of the fairy story. He does not mention adolescents, and it would be interesting to see where he might place the many adolescents in his reading audience today (some-

where between what he calls Eloi, "pretty children," and "dark Morlocks tending their machines"?). But the thrust of the essay is that fairy stories are for everyone:

If written with art, the prime value of fairy-stories will simply be that value which, as literature, they share with other literary forms. But fairy-stories offer also, in a peculiar degree or mode, these things: Fantasy, Recovery, Escape, and Consolation, all things of which children have, as a rule, less need than older people. (Tolkien, p. 67)

Certainly adolescents, suspended and moving between childhood and adulthood, have great need of these four comforts, and the popular novels of Blume and Zindel offer them in abundance.

Fantasy, Tolkien explains, is "freedom from the domination of observed fact," a rational rather than an irrational activity: "If men really could not distinguish between frogs and men, fairy-stories about frog-kings would not have arisen." (Tolkien, p. 73) When teenagers read *The Pigman*, observed fact tells them they do not have the nerve to do all the crazy things that John does — roller-skate through a department store, for example. But while they read they are free to do all that and more. The book offers a private defense mechanism, like a daydream, and to the adolescent urged by parents and guidance counselors to face facts, such a fantasy offers equilibrium and protection for his anxious ego. (The struggling businessman enjoys the same fairy-tale therapy when he watches J.R. spend money.)

The fantasy of the fairy tale lies also in two literary characteristics: the simplification of the characters and their isolation. The characters in a fairy tale represent one thing each: good, evil, beauty, the youngest, the stupidest. They do not change in the story but remain essentially what they are, though they may change outwardly, as the Beast in "Beauty and the Beast." Also, fairy tale protagonists are isolated. They are alone because of their beauty (Snow White), their station (Cinderella), or some circumstance (Rapunzel). In precisely the same way, characters in Blume and Zindel novels are simplified and isolated. The

simplification takes the form of stereotypes. Blume's parents speak in silly clichés and are easily gulled; Zindel's parent characters are equally flat and even less attractive than Blume's. Of course, the protagonists in the books are sensitive, intelligent, loving, always trying to communicate with the boorish adults who surround them, and equally two-dimensional. Blume's girls are beautiful and blond or skinny and tomboyish; Zindel's girls are usually shy and clumsy or fast and gorgeous. The boys are either handsome trouble-makers or bungling clods. But such stereotyping is part of the therapeutic value of the novels. When adolescent readers see this exaggerated image of themselves, they can recognize it for what it is, because they know they are more than shy and clumsy or fast and gorgeous. But at the same time, they can believe while they read that they are sensitive and wise, in contrast to the oppressive adults who fill their lives. Their fantasies are their defenses.

Just as fairy tale characters are isolated, so are the protagonists of these novels. John in *The Pigman* is cut off from his peers by his good looks and by his pranks and his intelligence; Lorraine has no communication with her mother and few friends. Each of the four protagonists in *My Darling*, *My Hamburger* is lonely even within

friendships. Margaret in *Are You There, God? It's Me Margaret* thinks she is different from the other girls in the Pre-Teen Sensations Club because she is sexually immature and religiously mixed-up. Tony in *Then Again Maybe I Won't* is cut off from his mother (she yells, "What problems? A thirteen-year-old boy doesn't have any problems!"), from his shoplifting neighbor, and from the friend he left behind in his old neighborhood. Adolescents are usually depicted in ads as surrounded by friends, endlessly talking on the phone or going to parties. In reality, adolescents feel isolated, alone, misunderstood by parents and friends. Herman Wouk remembers, "It was like living in a foreign country, vainly pretending to be a native and getting mocked at and fleeced from all sides." (Kiell, p. 86) The novels of Blume and Zindel offer a comforting, manageable reproduction of this conviction.

The second value that Tolkien believes the fairy tale offers is what he calls Recovery: we "regain a clear view" of the world. "We should meet the centaur and the dragon, and then perhaps suddenly behold, like the ancient shepherds, sheep, and dogs, and horses — and wolves." (Tolkien, p. 77) Similarly, when adolescents read an argument a Zindel character has with a parent, they see an exaggeration: the par-

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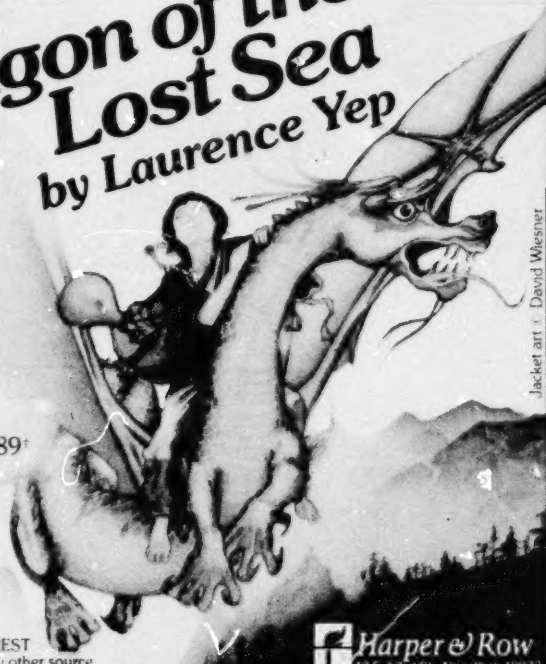
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ent has no redeeming qualities while the kid is honest and sensitive. Most thinking adolescents know things are not like that always, but indulging in this fantasy can prepare teenagers for the real argument that they may have with their parents, much as a dream refreshes, making them better able to deal with reality. Such fantasy is not "naive, juvenile escape," but "a blessing" which demands a "final return to a newly consecrated real, adult world after the temporary and therapeutic dream." (Hennelly, pp. 73-73)

The third psychological value which fairy tales offer us Tolkien calls Escape, but it is the Escape of the Prisoner rather than the Flight of the Deserter. (Tolkien, p. 79) Adolescents are prisoners; probably at no other time in our lives are we so imprisoned. Adolescents generally cannot support themselves financially, and society forces their sexuality into a furtive, experimental mold full of guilt and frustration; they cannot use the maturity they have. It is a time of economic and sexual unemployment. (Jersild, pp. 14-15) When adolescents read a novel by Blume or Zindel, they are certainly fleeing this imprisonment, and must flee it until they are able to face it alone. These novels offer adolescents a version of the oldest and most universal Escape tale: Cinderella. As Maggie in *My Darling, My Hamburger* graduates from high school, she changes from plain, shy, and clumsy, to someone able to look back at herself and see "a silly, foolish girl." (p. 119) John and Lorraine come to an understanding of themselves after the Pigman's death: "We had trespassed too — been where we didn't belong, and we were being punished for it...There was no one else to blame any more." (pp. 148-149) Tony in *Then Again, Maybe I Won't* says of his father, "I think he knows I'll be okay now — that I can face things." (p. 124) Katharine in *Forever* discovers, "I think it's just that I'm not ready for forever." (p. 220) And in the most blatant example, Margaret gets her period and chortles, "How about that? Now I am growing for sure. Now I am almost a woman!" (p. 148) When Cinderella goes to the ball, she is released from her imprisonment in the ashes into her true self, her real identity. "Her story is not one of rags to riches, or of dreams come true, but of reality made evident." (Opie, p. 11) When the protagonists of these novels solve their problems, they have escaped into maturity, into their real identities. The image is greatly simplified in the books, but as in the fairy tale, "testing, threatening danger, destruction — and salvation, development, maturation — are portrayed before our mind's eye in images which are unreal, but

for just that reason fascinating." (Luthi, P. 61)

In this archetypal Escape we see also the final value which Tolkien assigns to the fairy tale: Consolation, the "eucatastrophe," the fairy story's highest function. This is the happy ending, the denial of final defeat, the "piercing glimpse of joy and heart's desire." (Tolkien, p. 87) Like the fairy tales, Blume's and Zindel's novels end happily. The protagonists do make it after all, and this is the ultimate therapeutic value of the novels.

Bruno Bettelheim makes an interesting distinction between myth and fairy tale: Myths could only happen to one person at one time. "Events in myths are grandiose, awe-inspiring, and could not possibly happen to an ordinary mortal like you and me." But the fairy tale, because of its special property of simplification, presents its events as "ordinary, something that could happen to you or me or the person next door...Even the most remarkable encounters are related in casual, everyday ways in fairy tales." (Bettelheim, p. 37) Thus the fairy tale allows real identification, and so do these "realistic" novels. Unburdened with real individuals in the books, unique characters, the adolescent reader can see himself there. And "while the mythical hero experiences a transfiguration into eternal life in heaven, the central figure of a fairy tale lives happily ever after on earth, right among the rest of us." (Bettelheim, p. 37) In Freudian terms, the myths are good for developing the superego, but the fairy tales are good for developing a strong ego, providing readers with the essential optimism needed for everyday life. And such is the real Consolation offered by Blume and Zindel novels. Life will not be too much for the adolescent after all.

Our culture offers no definite rite of passage for the adolescent. Buying a bra, learning to drive, getting a job — all these may signal adulthood, but they occur at various ages. "This uncharted process of acquiring adult status may well breed confusion for some youngsters as to when they are, in our culture, in fact grown up." (Kiell, p. 195) In the novels, though, the passage is clearly marked. Maggie graduates from high school, John and Lorraine watch an old man die, Margaret gets her period. The signs are as clear as Rapunzel's discovery of her blinded prince, Sleeping Beauty's awakening, Jack's chopping down the beanstalk, or Cinderella's putting on the slipper. When the adolescent reads, then, the threatening aspects of maturity are momentarily brought under control. As in a daydream, the adult world loses some of its fear-

ful mystery, and adolescents can believe they will undergo their own rites of passage successfully.

Adolescents, then, need Blume and Zindel novels. For despite their overlay of realism and in fact because of their shallow plots and stereotyped characters, these novels offer wish-fulfilling daydreams, ego-nourishment, fairy tale fantasy which comforts adolescents and allows them to mature. No wonder the novels are popular.

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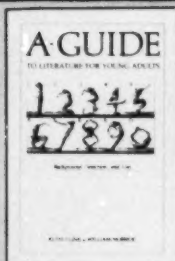
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AN INTERVIEW WITH KEVIN MAJOR

Mike Angelotti, Texas Tech University

KEVIN MAJOR, fast gaining recognition in the United States as an author of quality novels for young adults, achieved quick prominence in his native Canada by collecting four awards for his first novel *Hold Fast* (1978): the Canada Council Children's Literature Award, the Canadian Library Association Book of the Year Award for Children, the Ruth Schwartz Children's Book Award, and the Hans Christian Anderson Honour List.

Hold Fast is the story of Michael, the older of two brothers who face certain separation because of the sudden death of their parents. Forced from his beloved Newfoundland coast to live with his uncle in the city, Michael finds his new environment to be hostile and unnatural. Unwilling to adapt and driven by a powerful need to preserve in his growing sense of self the past of his father's and grandfather's time, Michael runs away — back to his home village of Marten.

Major's second novel confirms his potential to be a leading YA novelist. His most obvious strength is an ability to portray realistic characters who speak and think authentically. In *Far from Shore* (1980) he successfully manipulates multiple first person point-of-view to create a rounded image of his main character and unique insights into his minor characters. Sixteen-year-old Chris blames home and school conflicts for his failures and misbehaviors until facing the consequences of his own will make him aware that he is the primary source of his own problems.

Kevin Major lives with his wife in Sandy Cove, Newfoundland, and is at work on his third novel.

Q I don't want to overwhelm you right off the bat, but in view of your quick and present success, how do you feel about yourself as an author at this point in your career?

A I like to think that each book that I've published was the best book I could have produced

at the particular point in time it was written. Its concerns were the things I most wanted to write about at the time. If I were to write *Hold Fast* or *Far from Shore* now, I think they would be different, perhaps more fully realized. But then again probably they could not be written now; my greatest interest does not lie in those characters and situations. Even with the book I'm working on at the moment, which is taking longer than I anticipated to write, I'm anxious that it be over and done with so I can go on to something new. I feel very good about the success I've achieved, but I feel each book has to be a progression, a change of some sort, a new challenge.

Q That leads to the obligatory writer interview questions, so let's get them done with. How is it that you became a writer?

A I have always loved books — the look of them, the feel of them. My library has many books which I have only scanned briefly but which I couldn't resist buying. I have always read a lot but never to the extent of devouring everything I could lay my hands on. Writing seemed to follow naturally from reading. I wrote in high school, usually though in response to assignments from English teachers. The marks were good and one teacher even said that he thought one day I would write a book. When I went to university, I did so, however, with the intention of becoming a doctor. It was only after I switched faculties and graduated as a teacher that I went back to writing and started to work at it seriously. Eventually, I reached the point where I no longer wanted to teach full-time; I felt writing was what I had to be doing.

Q Many writers talk about having a writing "routine," three hours every morning or a certain number of pages each day. How do you write best?

A I used to think I wrote best in the morning and early afternoon, but now I find I can write practically any time, as long as I'm well-rested and find myself in a comfortable place with no distractions. And, of course, my personal life has

to be in order. I tend to write in spurts, spread over the day.

Q *So much for routines. What are your feelings on the essence of good writing?*

A Good writing starts, I believe, with a freshness of vision, be it in the approach to the story, the insights into the characters, the use of language, whatever. There must be believability; it must come alive to the reader. And, I think, it should be upsetting as well as joyful. That is, human.

Q *What personal value do you find in writing?*

A For me it's the pleasure of knowing that you have created something that others feel is of lasting worth to them. And that I may have given cause for people to reflect upon some aspect of their own lives or made them more understanding of the feelings and attitudes of others. I don't write only for entertainment, just as I don't read only for that.

Q *How would you answer the kid who asks, "Why should I write? What's in it for me?"*

A You write because you have to, that's what you do best. And I believe you don't ask first what's in it for me, you ask what's in it for the reader.

Q *What advice would you give aspiring young writers, then?*

A First and foremost — read, read the best that's written. Some you'll find boring and not get past the first few pages. But you'll strike several books that you can't put down and keep going back to. Then seek a biography of one of those authors and read about the struggle you have to endure to write something you're pleased with and then get it published. If you're discouraged and give up, you were never meant to be a writer anyway. If you are meant to write, you'll be pleased to learn that just as with anything else, a writer goes through a period of learning, of practice, of rejection, and, hopefully, a movement of triumph.

Q *Given that point-of-view, what advice would you give aspiring teachers of young writers?*

A If you are going to teach, be open-minded enough to realize that fiction takes many forms, some of which you may dislike, or disagree with, or even fail to understand. Show them the many paths; don't force them along your own.

Q *O.K. Now a tough one. Censorship. Much is said about censorship these days, particularly in the United States and especially in reference to young adult novels. Does this inhibit you at all in your writing? To what degree have you experienced attempts to censor your works?*

A I don't think of the possibility of censorship when I write. If there are words that have the same impact and convey the same meaning as the ones I first write, but may be less offensive to some people, then I'll make the second choice. But other than that, I make no attempt to tone down my writing for the sake of other people's concerns. If they don't want to read my work, fine, that is their choice. But neither should they deny others the opportunity to read it. I have known libraries, particularly school libraries, which refuse to carry my work. I have been asked by educators to rewrite *Hold Fast* into a "school" edition. I say, listen, any strong language or sexual references used in my books are there because they had to be there, given the characters I've created and situations I've put them in. To write otherwise would be false. And if the readers cannot take the characters to be believable, how can I expect them to take seriously what I'm trying to say in the book. If I were using it to be sensational to grab their attention, then yes, they might have reason to complain.

Q *Is there anything else that you might say to teachers and librarians concerned about using realistic fiction in the schools?*

A In fact, I do stress to teachers and librarians that literature is one means by which we see how other people live. Their speech, their attitudes, their lifestyles may be quite different from our own, but it is a vital part of our education to share in their lives. It makes us broader-minded, more tolerant individuals.

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BEYOND BOOKS

MEDIA FOR THE CLASSROOM

Dan Ward, Georgia State Department of Education

In the fast food wars, there's a chicken chain (cooking, not cowardice) making the claim we just do chicken and we do it right. It's an interesting approach in this age of diversification. It's even more interesting if you recall that the same folks once sold ribs and are now into the biscuit business. But I suppose it's the heart of the business to which they are referring.

In any event, there's something to sticking with what you know and doing it better than anyone else. That's what Caedmon seems to do, and it shows in the high quality and wide range of their audio (disc/tape) programs. Caedmon identifies a first-class or classic work and has a professional read it, preferably the author. Read it. Read it well. Read it dramatically. And sell it reasonably. Caedmon's recipe is less of a secret than the one the chicken folks use, but it's not the quality of the mystery that counts, it's the quality of the goods. And Caedmon's got the goods.

Among their recent releases are several that will interest the sci-fi fanciers. (Science fiction is still a big hit with students, even if we have stopped offering quarter courses in our frenzied retreat back to basics and excellence and...)

Arthur C. Clarke returns with excerpts from *2010: Odyssey Two* without Hal and, as yet, Stanley Kubrick but with the same cosmic mystery, still unsolved, still appealing, and still challenging. Clarke's not for everyone. His writing requires a reader with more than average interest, intellect, and ability; but for those students, he's there and *2010* is a fitting sequel to a story that captured the public imagination with some of the same force and elements as *E.T.* has.

Clarke claims *2010* is more than a sequel to *2001*. Whether that's wholly accurate or not is of no consequence; it's an appealing work integrating all the dramatic elements of good storytelling. On this program Caedmon offers six chapter excerpts, the "Zarathustra" theme, and an epilog aptly titled "20,001."

Arthur C. Clarke's *2010: Odyssey Two* fr. Caedmon, 1995 Broadway, New York, NY 10023/ (212) 580-3400; \$8.95 disc or cassette.

Isaac Asimov claims astonishment at the success of his now well-established, prosperous, middle-aged work *The Foundation Trilogy*. He further asserts that *Foundation's Edge*, the fourth book in the trilogy, was extorted from him by his publisher with threats of physical violence and dire consequences. I'm not up to challenging Dr. Asimov's arithmetic nor his right as an author to have a fourth third, but as a reader and a teacher, I'm glad he's back with more of his governmental, cultural, social intrigues, all based on the Seldon Plan. His reading still sounds as Dave Muschell put it nearly two years ago "like Brooklyn in space," but Asimov's story is stronger than any reaction to his speech pattern.

In Asimov's acknowledged sequel, the fate of all rests upon one banished politician, Golan Trevize. Trevize and his companion Janov Pelorat are plucked from space by Gaia, a planet of corporate, collective consciousness, for this purpose. Previous events of the trilogy are shown in more complete and different lights. In general, *Edge* should have wide appeal, especially to Asimov fans.

Isaac Asimov's *Foundation's Edge* fr. Caedmon, 1955 Broadway, New York, NY 10023/ (212) 580-3400; \$8.95 disc or cassette.

Frank Herbert's "Dune Trilogy," now the "Dune Saga," has been increased by one, *God Emperor of Dune*, excerpts from which he reads. The fabric of interwoven philosophy and storying common to the "Dune" siblings continues here. Leto delivers his messianic messages and "Dune" goes on delivering Frank Herbert's vision and his truths. Caedmon has done a real service to readers and teachers by keying the excerpts to specific pages. I wish they would (could?) do that keying more often.

Frank Herbert's *God Emperor of Dune* fr. Caedmon, 1995 Broadway, New York, NY 10023/ (212) 580-3400; \$8.95 disc or cassette.

Running slightly behind the drawing power of science fiction is the literature of castles and knights and lords and ladies and all that courtly intrigue. PBS and some BBC acquisitions have helped to "hype" the existing appeal that

chivalry has traditionally had among readers, particularly the pre- and early adolescent. Howard Pyle's *Men of Iron*, along with Mallory's "Morte D'Arthur" and Scott's *Ivanhoe*, is among the best and the most accessible. Ian Richardson reads excerpts from the work which describe the Falworth family's fall from grace, Myles Falworth's youth and training, and Myles' successful attempt as a young man to rescue his father's place in 15th century, feudal England.

This is male-oriented material without doubt, but that is also one of the toughest audiences to appeal to in the public school world and the group most likely to fall prey to the I won't (hate...can't) read syndrome. Caedmon has selected their excerpts with care to recreate the essence of the original story in a coherent fashion. The abridgement stands on its own, which does not always appeal to the teacher in me; but with a more youthful audience, an open-ended presentation can frustrate and bewilder as much (or more) as spark interest. There is enough material here to whet the appetite but not so much as to satisfy or satiate.

Howard Pyle's *Men of Iron* read by Ian Richardson fr. Caedmon, 1995 Broadway, New York, NY 10023/ (212) 580-3400; \$8.95 disc or cassette.

As a teacher who is also an avid movie goer, I am horrified by the long lines and large following of the horror films making the rounds in the last few years. It's a problem with some rather serious ramifications, especially if you've ever attempted to figure the average age of those standing in the lines. Demons, possessions, and the macabre sell. No doubt about that. And while I don't advocate the old "if you can't lick 'em, join 'em" routine, there's something in the popularity of this material with which to be reckoned. It's obviously appealing to adolescents. One way to capitalize upon and channel that appeal is through the more literate and well-established pieces, such as Stephen Vincent Benet's "The Devil and Daniel Webster" read by Pat Hingle. (It's not the same, I know; if it were, I wouldn't recommend it.)

Hingle's performance brings Benet's story vividly to life. The unfortunate Jabez Stone trades his immortal soul for earthly prosperity; old Scratch is the implacable adversary; and Daniel Webster's the ultimate victor in the unlikeliest courtroom in America. Along with all its other strong points, this story offers a *bonafide*, American hero, something we're short of this month.

Stephen Vincent Benet's "The Devil and Daniel Webster" read by Pat Hingle fr. Caedmon, 1995 Broadway, New York, NY 10023/ (212) 580-3400; \$8.95 disc or cassette.

Learning Corporation of America has been doing it right for quite some time with classroom films and has followed up on their successful short story series with still more titles. Two titles from this group are particularly appealing, "The Chaparral Prince" and "Split Cherry Tree."

"The Chaparral Prince" is a light-hearted, ironic O'Henry story. It is delightfully recreated in a style reminiscent of "The Apple Dumpling Gang" (but "Prince" has less slapstick and more quality). An unhappy serving girl at a local inn writes her mother begging relief and rescue, else she must run away and fend for herself in the world. Hondo Bill, a neighborhood n'er-do-well, finds the letter while robbing the mail stage and determines to set things right.

The story and the treatment given "Prince" are sentimental but light, and in a mild way the film introduces students to the conditions and reasons for child labor laws. "Prince" has a wide range of appeal (lower middle school to upper high school) and application. It makes a nice change from a steady diet of reality, too.

O'Henry's "The Chaparral Kid" fr. Learning Corporation of America, 1350 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10019/ (212) 397-9330; c; 20 min.; 16mm—\$550 sale/video—\$425 sale/\$50 rent.

"Split Cherry Tree" is reality softened with the gentle, knowing touch of Jesse Stuart. David Sexton, the adolescent protagonist, lives on an impoverished, upland farm. His father is a limited man with little formal education and a rough, sometimes brusque manner. While on a school field-trip, David and two companions damage a farmer's property. David's punishment makes him late for chores, a punishment Mr. Sexton finds unjust because the other boys were allowed to pay the damages and David had to work his debt off. Mr. Sexton sets off to the school with David and a pistol to set Professor Henry straight about punishment, justice, and education which don't include "galavantin' in the bush" and breaking down another man's property.

The meeting of the minds leaves Mr. Sexton and the teacher each changed and each with a better understanding of the other. Colleen Dew-

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HISTORICAL FICTION AND HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION

Joel Taxel, University of Georgia

Educators have long recognized that historical fiction affords the means to give life and dimension to the people, places, and events of history. While textbooks will undoubtedly continue to be the primary source of information about the past in most American classrooms, it is unlikely that many students will be sufficiently excited by them to further pursue the study of history. In contrast, well-written historical fiction has the power to bring the sights, sounds, and passions of the past to life and is far more likely to excite and evoke the kinds of responses necessary to stimulate further study. For example, when Johnny Tremain aimlessly wanders the streets of colonial Boston after an unfortunate accident ends a promising career as a silversmith, the reader not only can see, feel, and smell the texture of daily life in that hotbed of anti-British activity but can also sympathize with Johnny's crisis in identity — one similar to that experienced by many readers themselves.

Similarly many readers can identify with Adam Cooper of *April Morning*, who longs to be treated as an adult. For Adam that means being allowed to stand with his neighbors and face the British column approaching Lexington Common in April of 1775. Adam dreams of glory and has quite romantic notions about battle, notions that are quickly and tragically put to rest but a few moments after the "shot heard 'round the world."

Historical fiction's ability to recreate the events and personalities of the past is generally understood. What is less often recognized is that historical fiction contains more than just an account of past events such as the American Revolution or the Civil War. Books like *Johnny Tremain* and *April Morning* also contain specifiable historiographic explanations of the causes and meaning of the events they describe. What many authors and certainly most readers, need to more fully understand is that there is more than one possible explanation for most of history's significant events. Thus, while no one doubts something truly momentous occurred on the nineteenth of April in 1775 on Lexington Common, the significance and meaning of the events

leading up to and following it have been the subject of intense and changing debate amongst professional historians for over two centuries. An understanding of this point is crucial because the way we perceive and act toward the present is strongly influenced by our perceptions and understanding of the past.

Further, because most Americans learn their history from novels, television, and films — rather than from the works of historians (Collier, 1982, p. 9) — and because there is considerable lag between the time when changes occur in the interpretations of historians and the time these changes filter down into the popular media, it is important that we understand the nature of explanations of our past presented in popular novels, films, and television. Surely, one of the reasons that *Roots* kept millions of Americans riveted to their televisions for over a week was that it offered a view of the ante-bellum, Civil War, and Reconstruction periods from a black point-of-view. It is likely that a substantial majority of those comprising one of the largest television audiences in history were being confronted with a perspective and historiographic interpretation of these eras that was a radical departure from the one that had previously dominated popular thought and consciousness, the one contained in *Gone with the Wind*. Christopher Collier (1976), an historian and one of the few authors of books for young people to directly address these points, put it this way:

All written history is interpretation, and novelists present their own historical interpretation whether they are conscious of it or not. Thus, a particular historiographic view is frequently brought unconsciously to readers who are bound to absorb it equally unconsciously (p. 132).

In the remainder of this article I will suggest how a select group of historical novels written about the American Revolution can provide students not only with a series of excellent literary experiences, but also with a rudimentary understanding about several key points about the interpretation of the past. The first point is that explanations of historical events change. Thus, our

current understanding of the events leading up to and following the clash on Lexington Common is quite different from that of those living at the turn of the century or even of those who lived through the years of World War II. The second point relates closely to the first and speaks to the fact that both historians and authors of fiction interpret the past in ways that are strongly influenced by the concerns and preoccupations of the times in which they themselves write. This becomes clearer with an explanation of the ways in which books like *Johnny Tremain* (1943), written during World War II, differ from books like *My Brother Sam Is Dead* (1974) and *Freelon Starbird* (1976), which were written during the Vietnam War.

Johnny Tremain (Forbes, 1943) is undoubtedly the most widely-read book for young readers on the Revolution and has been said to encapsulate the dominant view of the Revolution in American popular culture (Kammen, 1978, p. 206). Written at a time when European and Asian fascism threatened the freedoms and liberties which most Americans think of as having their origins in the Revolution, the novel is consistent with Collier's (1976) description of the Whig interpretation of the Revolution. This interpretation perceives the Revolution as an epochal, divinely-inspired struggle to secure the very rights and liberties that Hitler, Mussolini, and Tojo came so close to obliterating. It was devotion to representative government, private property, and individual liberty that James Otis, in a climactic address to the Sons of Liberty, was referring when he stated:

For men and women and children all over the world...we are fighting for rights such as they will be enjoying a hundred years from now.

There shall be no more tyranny. A handful of men cannot seize power over thousands. A man shall choose who it is shall rule over him.

The peasants of France, the serfs of Russia. Hardly more than animals now. But because we fight, they shall see freedom like a new sun rising in the west. Those natural rights God has given to every man, no matter how humble...

So we hold up our torch — and do not forget it was lighted upon the fires of England — and we will set it as a new sun to lighten a world...

We give all we have, lives, property, safety, skills...we fight, we die for a simple thing. Only that a man can stand up. (Forbes, 1943, pp. 189-190, 192)

A similar vision of the Revolution is implicit in Howard Fast's, *April Morning* (1961), a book whose primary significance lies in the graphically

realistic manner in which it portrays the brutality of war. While *April Morning* contains less of the impassioned rhetoric that characterizes *Johnny Tremain*, it too rests on a conception of the Revolution as a struggle in which Americans "stood by certain rights and principles that are granted by Almighty God and the struggles of our fathers" (Fast, 1961, p. 87).

The Whig interpretation, and its more refined, less pedantic descendent, the Consensus interpretation, are present in the overwhelming majority of books written for young people (Taxel, 1983). Both interpretations place overriding emphasis on the roles political principles and ideology played in generating the Revolution (e.g. "no taxation without representation"). These explanations also stress the extent to which Americans shared a consensus about both their grievances with England and the proper course of action to take in response to them. In *Johnny Tremain*, for example, the most important characters who oppose American independence are base and avaricious Tories like Mr. Lyte. As is noted in greater detail elsewhere (Taxel, 1983), the way authors describe characters contributes to the overall conception of the events being described. Thus, in the case of *Johnny Tremain*, the fact that the pro-American characters like Rab Silesbee are uniformly good while the major characters who side with the British are portrayed negatively, reinforces the notion that the Revolution was a struggle pitting the forces of virtue and progress against those of evil, venal reaction.

While books written during the era of the Vietnam War continue to stress the importance of political principles and ideology in generating the Revolution, one finds dramatic changes in characterization, tone, and emphasis when books like *Early Thunder* (1967), *Redcoat in Boston* (1971), *When the World's on Fire* (1976), *My Brother Sam Is Dead* (1974), and *Freelon Starbird* (1976) are compared to a book like *Johnny Tremain*. For example, Fritz's *Early Thunder* shows that certain groups (e.g., the "Liberty Boys") favorable to the American cause were less than virtuous and that quite a few principled, even idealistic, individuals sided with the king. In contrast to the staunchly idealistic and patriotic Rab Silesbee and Johnny Tremain, Daniel West, Fritz's protagonist, is a Tory at the outset of the novel. Although he is ultimately converted to the American side, his initial embrace of the Crown results in a far more even-handed and measured presentation of that side's position. Fritz sees both Patriots and Tories sharing a loyalty to the king. The key to the con-

flict concerns the authority of the British Parliament, with colonial resistance directed at the recovery of the colonists' "just rights and liberties" (p. 118).

One of the most interesting perspectives on the Revolution is found in Finlayson's *Redcoat in Boston* (1971). It is told from the point-of-view of an impoverished British youth who illicitly exists in the British army and is subsequently posted in Boston. Harry Warrilow and his comrades naively expect to be greeted as heroes, but much to their dismay they are detested and reviled, viewed as "instruments of tyranny and oppression" (p. 258). Harry ultimately becomes involved in what has come to be known as the Boston Massacre, and Finlayson's description of that tragic event goes a long way toward dispelling the mythology that has surrounded it. Also included is a detailed account of the murder trial of Harry and the other British soldiers involved in the shooting. Harry was defended by Josiah Quincy, a leader of those opposed to British rule. Quincy was, however, so committed to "matters of principle" like the right to a fair trial — the very things that "set Englishmen apart from the helpless peasant on the continent" (p. 107) — that he willingly defended so universally a despised group of defendants. Thus, while Finlayson offers a welcome and novel British soldier's perspective on the Revolution, her interpretation, like those of the books discussed previously, rests on the belief that British threats to political rights and liberties (like the right to a fair trial) were the only causes of the Revolution.

Like *Early Thunder*, *Redcoat in Boston* is characterized in a way that makes it clear that those who championed the American cause were not uniformly virtuous. Patriots like Bill Green are depicted as nasty, brutish, and bullying men whose actions seem more the product of passion and impulse than the measured responses of idealistic patriots. Finlayson's recreation of the Boston Massacre trial also implies that several of the prosecution's witnesses were so intent on avenging the deaths of their comrades that they willingly perjured themselves.

Perhaps the most frequently discussed recent novel about the Revolution was written by historian Christopher Collier, quoted earlier, and his brother James. Rather than suggesting Americans shared a consensus about the correctness of the rebellion against the king, *My Brother Sam Is Dead* (1974) contains a picture of a family and community bitterly divided on this very issue.

Sixteen-year-old Sam Meeker is a staunch Patriot who sees the impending conflict in much

the same terms as does Johnny Tremain and Rab Sili-bee. To Sam, it all boils down to a question of principle, of whether men 3,000 miles away can "make laws for us" (p. 8). Foremost in the minds of individuals like Sam was the need to resist British attempts "to keep us their slaves" (p. 40).

Sam's father, however, is ever the pragmatist. He urges his son to remain uninvolved and desires only to continue running his prosperous tavern. Caught in the middle of this dispute is Tim, Sam's younger brother and the novel's protagonist. The tragedy of war is evident in the conclusion of the novel which finds Sam executed by his own army for a crime he did not commit, while his father dies after languishing aboard a disease-ridden British prison ship after being incarcerated for no apparent reason. Tim, finding hypocrisy and duplicity on both sides, chooses not to fight and instead sits out the war in the tavern with his mother.

For the protagonist of an American novel written about the Revolution to choose to remain uninvolved is indeed an astounding development when considered in the context of the body of fiction on this subject (Taxel, 1983). Tim Meeker's inability to find something worth fighting for makes him similar to Richard Snow's protagonist, Freelon Starbird, in the book *Freelon Starbird* (1976). Freelon, who becomes a member of Washington's rag-tag army after "accidentally" enlisting during a night of drunken revelry, begins his first-person narrative by declaring that he intends to put the rest "brave and nonsensical stories about the American colonies, Thirteen Sisters by the Sea, who slumbered awhile in Liberty's cradle until with fierce and common purpose they rose and girded on armour against the thunderbolts of British tyranny" (p. 1). This statement, a caricature of the Whig conception of the Revolution, and the rest of the novel make it clear that one of the author's purposes is to debunk the very conception of the Revolution that informs books like *Johnny Tremain*.

Freelon Starbird is a useful corrective to books like *Johnny Tremain* — a book of undeniable literary merit but which nevertheless is far too simplistic in its depiction of the Revolution (Collier, 1976, p. 138). The problem with Snow's novel is that while it succeeds in putting to rest the Whig interpretation of the Revolution, it fails to provide a coherent and plausible explanation of why so many thousands willingly fought and died for the Revolution.

An important value of books like *My Brother Sam Is Dead* and *Freelon Starbird*, aside from the

fact that both are compelling fiction, is that they suggest the ways in which the sociohistorical milieu in which authors write affects both what and the way they write. Both books were written at the height of the Vietnam War, a conflict that spurred large numbers of Americans to engage in active, often vociferous dissent against their government's foreign policy. That the anti-war movement was on the mind of the Colliers seems clear, for *My Brother Sam Is Dead* is, above all, an anti-war novel; a bitter denunciation of the folly and futility of war as a mode of social action. As Tim Meeker, who also serves as the novel's narrator, notes in his epilogue, "Somehow...I keep thinking there might have been another way, besides war, to achieve the same end" (p. 45).

The disillusionment which the Vietnam War, and the Watergate scandal that followed in its wake, engendered are evident in *Freelon Starbird*, a work whose tone is one of unrelenting cynicism. Snow even goes so far as to make a rather oblique allusion to Richard Nixon's eventual tenure in office (p. 207). These two books thus provide fine illustrations of the ways in which authors may use the concerns and preoccupations of their own era as a lens through which to re-examine the past.

Much of the discussion surrounding *My Brother Sam Is Dead* stemmed from a belief that it had "something new" to say about the Revolution. Co-author Christopher Collier disputes this claim, pointing out instead that what made the book different was its incorporation of the Progressive interpretation of the Revolution rather than the Whig/Consensus viewpoint. Unlike the Whig and Consensus historians who, as we have seen, focus on the role played by political and ideological matters in precipitating the rupture between king and colonies, Progressive historians, and their "New-Left" descendents, were concerned with the nature of the government to be established after home-rule was secured. This Progressive/New-Left interest in "who should rule at home" caused these historians to emphasize the part played by economics and class conflict in generating the Revolution. Although *My Brother Sam Is Dead* does show the divisions within at least one New England Community, it offers little insight into the issues behind these divisions. While an historical novel can hardly be expected to contain the detail of an historical monograph, the lack of at least some detail makes *Sam* somewhat disappointing. This is not, however, to diminish the novel's significance. *Sam*, as an anti-war novel, has much to say to young readers, not only about the Revolution,

but (indirectly) about the way history and fiction are informed by present day concerns.

The last novel to be discussed is the only one that I know of to adequately address the question that so concerns the Progressive/New-Left historians, the question of who precisely would rule after the colonies secured their independence from Britain. Sally Edwards' *When the World's On Fire* (1972) is also the only book I know of which views the Revolution from a black perspective and confronts what historian Edmund Morgan (1976) termed the "central paradox of American history" when he referred to the fact that the movement for American freedom and liberty occurred at the very time that slavery was being institutionalized in several of the colonies. The almost total silence of American Revolutionary War fiction written for children on this point (Taxel, 1981) is surprising, especially in those books written during and in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement. The fact that most authors, particularly those writing in the sixties and seventies, seem to avoid discussing the paradoxical situation in which a revolution for freedom and liberty was fought by individuals, many of whom were slave holders, also indicates the dangers of simplistically suggesting that what authors of history and fiction write is mechanistically determined by, and can be reduced to, a reflexive reaction to contemporary events.

Edwards' novel views the British occupation of Charleston, South Carolina, from the point-of-view of a nine-year-old slave, Annie McGee. The tragic paradox is addressed with telling effect, as is the aforementioned question of who would rule after independence was secured. Rather than portraying the conflict solely in terms of colonial grievances against the Crown, Edwards, through Annie and the unforgettable Maum Kate, recognizes that "the war is really two wars." Kate especially understands that once independence is secured, the decision about who would lead the new nation — "the poor men like your master who stand against slavery or the rich men, the planters who would keep the black men in chains as long as money jingles in their pockets" (pp. 53-54) — would have to be made.

Edwards vividly portrays the agonizing situation that confronted blacks who constituted approximately twenty percent of the population. As Maum Kate puts it:

The Americans promise freedom, if only we will ride and fight with them in the swamps. The Americans babble about liberty — yet it is

their own liberty they dream of, not ours. And the British, the most civilized of men, promise freedom only to enslave the slave. We lose either way. (p. 101)

The sense one gets of what the Revolution was about after reading these books will probably cause young readers — and many of their elders — to wonder whether they are, in fact, reading about the same event. This would undoubtedly be the case if a book like *Johnny Tremain* is read in conjunction with *Freelon Starbird* or *When the World's on Fire*. The point here is not that students need to be able to make distinctions between the subtleties of conflicting historical interpretations (although that is not an unworthy goal). Rather it is to get students, and their teachers, to begin to understand that accounts of the past, be they fiction or non-fiction, necessarily and unavoidably involve interpretation, and that different interpretations affect our understanding not only of the event itself but also of the present. The explanation of the Revolution found in *Johnny Tremain*, for example, suggests that it marked the birth of a near-perfect form of government while that present in both *When the World's on Fire* and *Freelon Starbird* painfully illustrates the imperfect nature of a Revolution that in important respects is still to be completed. This discussion points to the need to augment traditional literary study of texts with a consideration of the nature or the explanations authors give us of the past and the significance of the varying interpretations.

Finally, by situating literature within the context of the time in which it is written, we can also begin to gain insight into some of the ways interpretation is conditioned (if not determined) by time and circumstance. Perhaps most significantly we need to be more critical and distanced in regard to what we read, hear, and view, and thus recognize that historical "truth" is, in large part, in the eyes of each generation of beholders.

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Media — continued from Page 30

hurst's small role as the wife and mother adds a nice touch to a superior piece. "Split Cherry Tree" is one of the best pieces of work I've seen in long, long time. It is an investment in established literature of enduring quality, and it is so well made that the film stands on its own merits as superior among those films available to the classroom as well as the general public.

"Cherry Tree" has the feel of "Coal Miner's Daughter" with special attention given to subtle interactions of father and son, father and mother, and mother and son. Nothing is overstated, which lends the film and the characters a quiet, simple dignity appropriate to their very limited environment.

The father's pride in and hope for the son is disclosed in their walk home from the school. Mr. Sexton speaks of himself as one of the best men of his time to come out of the hills, and he observes that his son with that education is going to be even better...but he admonishes Dave to be good to the animals and never kill snakes. The old values are blended with the new and Dave sees in his father, as he has always seen, a good man.

Jesse Stuart's "Split Cherry Tree" fr. Learning Corporation of America, 1350 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10019/ (212) 397-9330; c.; 26 min.; 16mm—\$550 sale/video—\$425 sale/\$50 rent.

NONFICTION — ALAN'S NEWS

APPLICATIONS CALLED FOR EDITORSHIP

Under the procedures approved at the annual meeting last November, President Robert Small is calling for applications from any member interested in becoming the next editor of *The ALAN Review*.

Applications should include the following:

1. Vita of applicant
2. Estimates from the provider(s) of services for
 - a. Typesetting/Composition-Layout
 - b. Printing
3. Letter from an appropriate administrator demonstrating institutional support.
4. Statement of plans for the journal, indicating proposed retention or changes in journal format, content, and editorial policy.

Pending the appointment of the official chair of the search committee, applications should be sent to:

Dr. Robert C. Small, Jr.
Associate Dean
College of Education
VPI & SU
Blacksburg, VA 24061

The deadline for the submission of applications is July 1, 1983.

The editor's term is for three years and is renewable once. That is, no individual is to serve more than two consecutive three-year terms as editor. The new editor's term is to begin with the spring 1984 issue, following formal confirmation at the 1983 annual meeting.

DUES INCREASED FOR FOREIGN MAILING

An increase in dues for foreign members was passed at the annual meeting held in Washington last November. This increase was made necessary by the increased cost of mailing to foreign addresses. Not only have the postal rates increased

but the weight of the journal has increased considerably, thereby making the mailing more costly. The current membership rates for U.S. members can be maintained for the time being because of the favorable postal rates available within the U.S. under our bulk mailing permit.

The new rates for members outside the U.S. are as follow:

\$9.00 for one year or
\$25.00 for three years

Also, payment is to be made in U.S. funds only.

NOMINATIONS CALLED FOR ALAN OFFICES

The Nominating Committee invites all ALAN members to suggest potential candidates for the following offices:

Vice President/President Elect
Secretary

Directors (three (3) to be elected)

Send your recommendations, including names, complete addresses (with zip codes), complete telephone numbers, and a few words about their qualifications to any of the nominating committee members by April 1, 1983: Alan M. McLeod (Chair), School of Education, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia 23284 (804-257-1324); Leila Christenbury, 2519 Carolina Avenue, Roanoke, Virginia 24011; Faith Schullstrom, 62 Bishop Gate, Apt. F., Gunderland, New York 12084.

STUDY AT OXFORD OFFERED

A six-week 1983 summer program at Oriel College, Oxford (England) offers up to nine hours in transferable graduate credit. Courses include Shakespeare, Milton, 17th-century literature, the novel of manners, British and American autobiography, and modern drama. For information, write: Oxford Program, Department of English, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL 60115.

NCTE STATEMENT DIFFERENTIATES SELECTION FROM CENSORSHIP

The Board of Directors of the National Council of Teachers of English adopted a policy statement spelling out the distinctions between censoring textbooks and other teaching materials and setting guidelines for selection of such materials.

"Schools are for learning — for including information, not excluding it," said Diane Shugert, chair of the NCTE Committee Against Censorship, in comments about the new policy statement. "Schools are for knowing the world, not hiding from it. We should teach students to examine the views found in our democratic, pluralistic society. This new statement expresses NCTE's commitment to learning and to knowing in our democracy."

The new statement says that "Censorship and guidelines sometimes appear similar because both involve selection from myriad alternatives." It points out that the selection decisions facing teachers and administrators are becoming more complicated because of the increasingly broad and varied materials on the market and the cultural diversity of today's students.

"Guidelines help teachers of English language arts to make those decisions," the new policy statement notes. "NCTE advocates and supports guidelines that help teachers avoid censorship. NCTE opposes censorship wherever it appears."

EXHIBIT FEATURED ARCHER COLLECTION

An exhibit featuring gifts from the Marguerite Archer Collection of children's books was held at the J. Paul Leonard Library at San Francisco State University last fall. The exhibit featured 122 items selected

from a gift to the University Library of approximately 3,000 books, periodicals, and materials related to children's literature.

The outstanding Archer collection documents the history of children's literature and is a major resource for scholars. It shows the progressive development and growth of children's literature from the early nineteenth century through the 1920's.

HUMOR-AND-METAPHOR CONFERENCE

The second conference on linguistic humor will be held at the Phoenix Hilton Hotel from March 30 to April 2. The theme of the conference is "Humor and Metaphor." Keynote speakers will probably include Reinhold Aman (president of Maledicta), George Lakoff (California linguist), Ric Masten (California poet), Allen Walker Read (New York linguist), Susan Kelz Sperling (New York author), and Larry Wilde (California author). For further information, please contact Don Nilsen, English Department, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ 85287.

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE INSTITUTE ANNOUNCED

"Sharing the Joy of Literature with Children and Youth" is the third annual Children's Literature Institute cosponsored by Northern Illinois University's Department of Library Science, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, and NIU's Graduate School. This two-day program is designed for teachers, librarians, parents, and school administrators. Participants will learn ways of helping children discover the esthetic qualities of literature as well as ways in which children can be encouraged to respond esthetically. Participants will share in their perspectives of a variety of speakers and will have opportunities to view book and media demonstrations.

Participants who meet NIU admission requirements may wish to enroll for one semester hour of graduate level credit in Library Science (LIBS 590), Elementary Education (CIEE 590), or Reading (CIRE 590). Students must attend all sessions of the institute and will be required to write a brief paper.

Speakers to be highlighted include Gwendolyn Brooks, Poet Laureate of the State of Illinois; John Grandits, art director, *Cricket Magazine*; Leland Jacobs, professor emeritus of education, Teachers College, Columbia University; Nancy Polette, author of *Celebrating with Books*, and *Reading Guidance in a Media Age*; Berniece Rabe, author of *Naomi* and *The Girl Who Had No Name*; and Peggy Sullivan, Dean College of Professional Studies, NIU, and past president of the American Library Association.

The institute will begin at 9 a.m. on Friday, April 29, and conclude at 3 p.m. on Saturday, April 30. The institute fee of \$53 per person includes materials, three meals, and refreshments. For participants enrolling for academic credit, tuition is an additional \$34.

Pre-registration is strongly encouraged. For registration materials or further information contact:

Christine S. Oots
College of Continuing Education
Northern Illinois University
DeKalb, Illinois 60115
Tele: (815) 753-1457

CALLING B FOR BUTTERFLY by Louise Lawrence

Four teenagers and two small children "are the only survivors when an asteroid smashes a starliner leaving the six alone in life ferry B (B for butterfly). By chance, contact is made with Ganymede, and a perilous plan is devised to bring the travelers onto the orbiting space station. Then, another life force is discovered on Butterfly, one that has a purpose of its own.

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Jacket art © Jeff Kronen

Q You mentioned in *Newfoundland TV Topics* (1980) "young people...caught between the old ways and the new ways" as a theme in your works, especially *Hold Fast*. Would you consider this your major theme?

A The themes of most writers grow out of their environment. I had the good fortune to be born in Newfoundland — a part of North America, yet not in its mainstream. It's an island to begin with, but also it was a separate country until confederation with Canada in 1949 (the year I was born). Newfoundland has had to assimilate into its distinctive culture, built up over centuries, the mass culture of North American TV, movies, music, etc. There was a period when many of us said dispense with the old ways, embrace the new totally. But we came to see that there are many aspects of our traditional way of life that are far superior to anything that can come to us from the outside. Newfoundland young people have had to integrate the two, sometimes to their confusion. This has been one of my themes, perhaps the major. But any writer must see beyond his immediate environment and present characters and stories, which, although true to the small bit of the earth he writes about, have relevance to the general human condition and can speak to readers no matter where they live.

Q You have written your novels from different points-of-view. Would you comment on what each allowed you to do and not do as a YA writer?

A *Hold Fast* was seen completely through the eyes of Michael. This gave the story a directness, an intimacy that is particularly appealing to young people. All readers, I think, no matter what the age, felt they knew Michael very well by the end of the story because they had seen him respond to so many situations and express his feelings on so many topics. He gave the story its strong narrative drive. What the one-person viewpoint didn't allow me to do was develop some of the other characters as well as I would have liked. They're viewed from Michael's perspective, so naturally the picture of them is colored somewhat to suit him. In *Far from Shore* (which is still in the first-person, but told from varying points-of-view) I sacrificed the drive of the narration for more fully realized characters. The story is sometimes jumpy because I constantly switched narrators. But because I was tel-

ling the story of a family much more than I was in the first novel, I wanted the reader to see just how each member viewed the other and how they responded to the changes that the family was undergoing. It was a challenge to write it, and more of a challenge to read than *Hold Fast*. And I think young people need to be challenged in their reading more than they are by most of the new fiction being written. The novel which I'm working on at the moment uses a third-person viewpoint and is structurally different again. It has allowed me to move more freely in time and space and has given the detachment I was seeking, as well, of course, as more varied use of language. I am fearful of losing the direct contact with the reader that the other two books had, yet I am enjoying the versatility that the third-person brings.

Q Inevitably, as in the Maclean's piece (1979), Michael would be compared to Holden Caulfield. Do you find this a valid comparison? A desirable one?

A I'm sure readers must get sick of seeing comparisons to Holden Caulfield on book jackets. It's a convenient way for reviewers to categorize a style of writing. Michael has his directness of voice, but I don't see a great deal more that they have in common. Michael certainly wouldn't be at home in New York City, and I don't think he is near as sensitive to other people as Caulfield. They would, however, make interesting hitchhiking companions.

Q Now there's an interesting premise for a book, but back to reviewers for a moment, your craftsmanship in characterization and dialogue have been acclaimed for their "authenticity," for example, in the *Calgary Herald* (1981) piece. What is your reaction to reviews of your work? Do you find the reviewers fair, insightful, off the mark?

A Reviewers, and their reviews, stir up a variety of reactions. Some you'd like to shake their hands, others you'd like to shake their heads. Some can actually be of considerable help to you; others, if you took seriously what they had to say, could make you want to give up in shame. One review of *Hold Fast* called Michael "an unteachable brute" and questioned whether he was "a fit subject for fiction." I rarely respond directly to reviewers but those comments stuck with me for so long that I finally had to write and say "You must be kidding. Did you read the same book that I wrote?" On the whole, I've been

quite pleased by the reviews of both novels, especially the ones that have been written by young people. I like what one young reviewer said of *Far from Shore*: "I think you'll like this book and you'll get a few good laughs out of it, too."

Q What other reactions do you get from readers? Are you able to respond personally to them?

A The reactions I get from readers, both in person and by mail, have all been pretty positive. If they write out of genuine interest and not just as a part of a classroom project, I'm especially appreciative. It makes me feel that what I'm doing is that much more worthwhile. Some write to say that they share a lot of the same feelings as some of the characters in the books.

I make an attempt to reply to all the letters I get. I like that person-to-person communication. Unlike some adults, I usually feel very comfortable chatting with young people, whether by mail or after a reading I've given. Sometimes it's their parents that express gratitude for having given them insights into their own children, or for having written books that stir up interest in reading among their teenagers.

Q I understand that you had the first draft of *Hold Fast* finished in six months and, after some major revisions, had it accepted its first time out by Clarke, Irwin. Was it as easy as it appears? Has your success come as suddenly and completely as the media suggest?

A Clarke, Irwin was the first publisher I sent the manuscript to, and it was published within nine months of their first receiving it. What most people don't know is that I had written a novel previously, a shorter one, one that was never accepted for publication, although the brown parcel usually did have a few encouraging words inside. Looking at it now, I'm glad it wasn't accepted. But at the time, gosh, what a disappointment to see it coming back each time.

Q What are your thoughts on the movie possibilities for your books?

A I have in fact worked on a screenplay for *Hold Fast*. Right now the project has stalemated for lack of capital, but I'm confident that at some point it will be filmed. I think the story has the potential for a very fine movie. It is rich in setting, character, and dialogue. In working on the screenplay I was forced to rethink and go a bit deeper into the story, the characters' motivations, etc., all of which I found very worthwhile. Of course, a screenplay is only a flexible guideline for the end product. So many other factors must come together and work well together in order for the production to take place. That is scary. An author wants the translation into film to retain the sensitivity and meaning of the original work, yet he knows it can't all be in his hands and there may well be numerous restraints over which he has no control.

Q Beyond screenwriting, what else do you see in your future?

A What the future will bring I'm not certain. I don't think either of my finished books should lie solely in the YA category, yet I do feel a certain obligation to young people because many of them have responded so positively to my work. I can only say I'll be writing about subjects that interest me, in a manner with which I feel comfortable. Novels certainly, but I would like to write a full-length play.

Thank you, and I think that I speak for the kids who enjoy your books when I say that I hope more YA books are in your future.

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